Predictions, pollification, and Pol Profs: the 'Corbyn Problem' beyond Corbyn

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Abstract: It has been noted that UK political punditry has a 'Corbyn problem': an underlying hostility to the Corbyn project and its supporters. As the Corbyn era draws to a close, we take stock and argue that the Corbyn problem was never fully 'about' Corbyn. Instead, it was the outward manifestation of a conjunction of tendencies present in contemporary UK politics: the prominence of a relatively small group of 'intensely involved' individuals driving dominant political discourse; the inability of traditional purveyors of broadcast media coverage to adapt to contemporary political currents and an unwillingness to self-reflect on possible biases in their approach; and the 'pollification' of election campaign coverage, aided by mainstream political scientists stereotyped in the figure of the 'Pol Prof'. Combined, these tendencies are hostile to left-wing political actors and movements. They will not disappear with Corbyn and may even intensify as their structural underpinnings strengthen further.

Keywords: Corbyn, political science, Labour, media, intensely politically involved, pollification

Jeremy Corbyn's rise to the position of Leader of the Labour Party in 2015 prompted a hostile response from almost all elements of the political class, most notably from mainstream pundits drawn from the media, politics, and academia.[i] This group embodied what some dubbed the 'Corbyn problem': an 'underlying generally dismissive attitude towards the political dynamics that his candidacy and subsequent leadership represented and have set in motion'.[ii] If these attitudes were hidden in plain sight in 2017, it is fair to say that they became fully visible in 2019 during an election campaign that saw the attacks on Corbyn and his Labour Party both spread beyond their traditional dispensers and intensify in strength.

As the Corbyn era draws to a close, some reflection on the Corbyn problem is timely, as is asking the question of whether the 'problem' will outlive Corbyn himself? We argue that, at root, the Corbyn problem was never fully 'about' Corbyn, but is instead the outward manifestation of a conjunction of underlying tendencies present in contemporary UK politics: the prominence of a relatively small group of 'intensely involved' individuals who work in or around politics, the media, or in the policy and think-tank sphere who shape and drive dominant political discourse; the inability of traditional purveyors of broadcast media coverage to adapt to contemporary political currents and an unwillingness to self-reflect on possible biases in their approach; and the 'pollification' of election campaign coverage, supported in this focus by mainstream political scientists. This group, stereotyped in the figure of the 'Pol Prof', increasingly possess significant social power and the ability to shape mainstream political discourse.

We begin by sketching the changing nature of the Corbyn problem in 2019 – focusing on the treatment of both the Conservatives and Labour in media coverage – before examining the role of opinion polling and political science. In sum we argue that, in the end, the 'Corbyn problem' is a symptom of deeper tendencies among and within UK political institutions, political commentary, and academics working on UK politics, all of which look set to outlive Corbyn's leadership of the Labour Party.

Conservatives play politics on 'easy mode', Labour on 'hard'

It is uncontroversial to make a case that the majority of the print media and journalists working within it have traditionally had an aversion to the Labour Party and 2019 offered no real surprises or change in this regard.[iii] Taking this negative newspaper coverage as familiar background noise, the discussion around the role of the media in the 2019 election campaign has instead focused on the role of broadcast media. This was evident in two phenomena recurrent throughout the campaign, often linked: first, the struggle of the BBC to maintain its usual face of 'due impartiality in all output' and second, the increasingly unorthodox and norm-stretching campaigning techniques and strategy of the Conservative party that frustrated traditional modes of reporting.

On November 28th, Channel 4 hosted the first ever election campaign debate focused solely on the issue of climate change, attended by the leaders of Labour, the Liberal Democrats, SNP, Green Party, and Plaid Cymru. Boris Johnson apparently refused to take part and Channel 4 instead placed a block of melting ice where he would have otherwise been standing. Outside, Secretary of State for the Environment, Michael Gove, and Boris Johnson's father, Stanley Johnson, sought to gain entry to the debate proposing that Gove take Johnson (junior's) place. The other party leaders refused this offer, something Gove claimed showed they 'wouldn't accept a Conservative voice'. In the wake of this, anonymous Conservative sources briefed that, if successful at the election, the new government would explore reviewing the terms of Channel 4's broadcasting remit, something seen as a thinly-veiled threat by many commentators. This followed a Channel 4 interview eight days earlier, in which Gove had repeatedly called into question the political motives of interviewer Ciaran Jenkins, accusing him of 'polemical journalism' and 'mounting a rigorous left-wing case', stating 'people know that's what Channel 4 News and you do.'[iv]

The other key incident that saw the Conservatives testing the boundaries established by the main broadcasters was Boris Johnson refusing to be interviewed by Andrew Neil (supposedly the toughest of the BBC political interviewers). This November 28th refusal came *after* Jeremy Corbyn had been interviewed by Neil and was reportedly promised by the BBC that all party leaders had already agreed to the same treatment. Johnson and the Conservatives instead proposed that he be interviewed by Andrew Marr on his Sunday show – presumably an easier touch in their eyes. Having initially refused this request, the BBC relented following a terrorist attack in London on November 29th, citing the national interest in hearing from the Prime

Minister under these circumstances. The Conservatives appeared to face no serious consequences as a result of these actions.

Turning to Corbyn and Labour, much negative coverage rested on the analytical category of 'credibility', as have post-mortems of the election result. Credibility, as used in this context, is invoked as a neutral conceptual frame that can be used to determine whether a given political demand is outside the realm of political possibility. Despite masquerading as a neutral term, the notion of 'credibility' bears a significant ideological burden. Credibility is not a concept like weight or height that, when measured, can be independently agreed upon by all observers. Rather, it is observer-dependent; that is, for any one person to say that something is politically credible or not depends on what they themselves deem to be politically possible. Indeed, the very purpose of political movements of various stripes is to argue for their own conception of what is credible – it is not difficult to imagine that many observers felt revolutionary events, for example, were not credible until, suddenly, they were. Consequently, chameleon-like, credibility is likely to take on the dominant characteristics of the environment in which it emerges. If that environment is overwhelmingly hostile to articulations of left-wing politics, those ideas will have a higher bar to clear to seem credible.

Labour's manifesto was a self-proclaimed 'radical' offer. This was covered by the print media in the expected way – it was 'crazy' and would 'cripple family finances' according to *The Sun*. The BBC, along with broadsheet newspapers, drew on the generally-accepted judgement of the Institute for Fiscal Studies (IFS) whose spokesman claimed that Labour's plans were 'simply not credible'.[v] Despite the IFS being roughly equally critical of the manifestos of both main parties, the three main television broadcasters covered the reaction to Labour 15 times in the two days after launching their manifesto compared to once for the Conservatives following theirs. This is arguably a material manifestation of Labour's credibility deficit, with Labour's proposals receiving significantly greater scrutiny than the Conservatives'. A different, more serious, example of this regards the lamentable cases of racism in both main parties. On this issue, Labour again received significantly more scrutiny of ongoing issues of antisemitism in the party than similar incidences of racism in the Conservative Party.

A wider tendency of media coverage was to fall into what might be dubbed a 'false equivalency trap' – casting two distinct political events as being somehow 'the same' and in doing so eliding critical differences between them. Emily Maitlis, presenter of BBC Newsnight, tweeted 'We may come to dub this "the Election of 2 billion trees and 50 thousand nurses" - where numbers and accountability became meaningless. That's a scary legacy'. Labour's tree-planting policy was, however, in line with the recommendations of expert bodies including the Committee on Climate Change and the Woodland Trust[vi], while Boris Johnson's claim regarding '50,000 more nurses' was admitted even by him to be untrue.[vii] In a similar vein, *Observer* columnist Nick Cohen saw equivalence between the Conservatives' threats to Channel 4 (described above) and the Labour Party having a WhatsApp group of friendly

journalists with whom briefings could be shared. Here, Cohen equates the government threatening a major broadcaster with the removal of their broadcasting licence with the standard practice of 'briefing', where politicians selectively share beneficial information with journalists, seeing both as 'corruption'. Yet another example of this was Laura Kuenssberg, political editor of BBC News, comparing Jeremy Corbyn's stumbling response to the question of whether he watched the Queen's Christmas message ('some of the time') to Boris Johnson repeatedly claiming that there would be no customs checks on goods entering Britain from Northern Ireland under his Brexit deal – the latter claim is untrue and contradicts the testimony of Johnson's own Brexit Secretary. Kuenssberg, viewing these incidents, wrote 'Brass neck's been one of central features of this campaign - Johnson on checks…or Corbyn on watching the Queen', again suggesting equivalence, despite it being questionable whether the latter issue is newsworthy at all.[viii]

Predictably, it has since become the fashion to make statements to the effect that 'it is a shame that so little attention was paid to how the governing party campaigned compared to the attention placed on Labour', with political journalists gaining kudos for making banal pronouncements along these lines following the election.[ix] Many doing so invoke a spectral 'we' when assigning responsibility for this task, obscuring the reality that they are the group with the power and profile to hold leading politicians to account and, when given the opportunity, failed to do so adequately.

Why did these incidents end up stumping the broadcasters and apparently having few if any negative consequences for the Conservatives? One possibility is that the style of political coverage adopted by the main broadcasters, and the BBC in particular, is premised on the major political parties agreeing to engage with each other, the media, and the political system itself within the boundaries of some set of agreed rules, norms, and practices. These may include agreement not to call into question the political motives of an interviewer, to generally not misrepresent certain kinds of facts, and essentially to operate in a way that would not call into question – or do harm to – the foundations of the British political system itself. On top of this, however, are what now look like a series of lazy assumptions on the part of key actors – especially the BBC – that the Conservatives would do what they said they would and maintain commitments to participate in broadcast activities. This error is not 'bias' in the sense that a decision was made by an individual at the BBC to let Boris Johnson off the hook in avoiding being interviewed by Neil, but rather reflective of an underlying 'old sport' attitude rooted in a belief that the Conservatives would play fair; a form of 'chumocracy'.

This misunderstanding of bias was visible in defences of the BBC's conduct during the campaign that were put forward by a number of senior BBC figures, including Huw Edwards who wrote that 'These critics imagine a world in which thousands of BBC journalists…work to a specific political agenda 'dictated' by 'a few powerful individuals''.[x] Defining bias in this way confuses what might be called agentic bias – individuals deciding to do *X* because it favours

or harms *Y* – with a more structural bias that, by no wilful fault of any specific individual, will favour certain kinds of political causes over others based on wider arrangements of power and influence in society. Imagine the reaction of the media had Jeremy Corbyn refused to be interviewed by Andrew Neil. Imagine that rather than attend the Channel 4 debate on climate change, Corbyn had sent his father and Richard Burgon. The point, of course, is that you can't – Labour have to clear a higher bar to be considered credible, meaning they lack the ability to freewheel and go off-piste that the Conservatives not only enjoy, but are *granted* by the approach of the media. In contrast, Corbyn and Labour are variously criticised for not watching a Christmas address from the Queen, for engaging in the practice of sharing information with journalists, or for outlining a tree-planting policy that sounded unlikely at first glance. If the Conservatives play politics on easy mode, when led by a leader from the left of the party, Labour play on hard.

Pol Profs, pollification, and exclusion

The 2019 campaign once again saw opinion polling dominate the online and broadcast discussion among what might be called the 'intensely politically involved' – individuals working in politics and those cottage industries that comment on it, including political journalism and the academic discipline of political science. The campaign saw an intensification of the dissemination of opinion polls via social media, the overwhelming majority of which showed the Labour Party to be trailing the Conservatives. A small number of Labour supporters saw in this one-way polling traffic a conspiracy of sorts that they felt was in place to undermine the confidence of those campaigning for a Corbyn-led government after polling day. Such complaints most notably coalesced around the Twitter hashtag '#YouGov', referring to the high-profile opinion-polling company. This prompted a response from members of the intensely involved that was almost mocking – for example, Matt Singh, an opinion pollster, described them as 'tinfoil hat conspiracies' and Kieran Pedley of IpsosMORI saw them as 'a bit gaga'.[xi] Some pollsters, and indeed some academics residing in close social proximity to them, used these fringe complaints as sustenance for a narrative that they were continuing with this kind of work in the face of (non-existent) oppression, all while coverage of the latest polls dominated the national media. The easy downplaying of such extreme criticisms of opinion polling's role in the election campaign effectively gave purveyors of this kind of horserace coverage a free pass by allowing them to sidestep less hysterical but perhaps more challenging critiques of what an excess of opinion polling can do to political debate in the lead up to an election.

Rather than offer the already-socially powerful and politically savvy a chance to mock those they see as 'cranks' or similar, the #YouGov incident, along with a wider sense of discomfort with a polling-dominated social media bubble of those who make the political weather, should be seen as an indictment of the dominance of this form of political analysis. Specifically, it raises urgent questions about the desirability, sustainability, and fairness of a form of political debate that excludes most people lacking the educational and cultural

credentials that are required to participate. The 'pollification' of political discussion and coverage shifts the conversation away from political things that people can discuss without expertise in sampling and statistics (expertise concentrated among those who have had access to quite specific forms of higher education) and onto a playing field that is largely inaccessible and incomprehensible to many. As Twitter increasingly establishes itself as the platform of choice for political discussion among the intensely politically involved, members of the public who wish to join the discussion will likely seek to do this on Twitter. Right now, though, to seek to join is to do so on the terms of the most socially powerful players on the platform. If those terms lean heavily on discussions of opinion polling, to attempt to join is, to an extent, to be forced to participate in discussions of opinion polling.

This was compounded by the way that polling data was released into the public sphere; polling companies, academics, and journalists eagerly advertised the release of polls in advance, often dropping oblique hints as to their content in the days before, with tension rising until results were unveiled. Inevitably, when the desired outcome was achieved – an over-excited reception by the public, a storm of retweets, a headline or mention in a newspaper – the very same individuals who had generated this fever pitch would then be at pains to point out that this was 'just one poll' and therefore not to be taken *too* seriously. The tediousness of this double move comes just a close second to its deleterious effect on political discourse and the phenomenon arguably saw its apex with the frenzy surrounding the release of YouGov's first MRP poll on November 27th.[1]

The response of pollsters to any criticism of the dominance of this form of political coverage suggests some complacency; again, Matt Singh: 'Asking the public what they think and then using that to understand how people might vote, is not bias. It's polling. It's psephology'.[xii] Such a dismissal is largely ignorant to how differential social power works and to how the intensely politically involved (including pollsters, journalists, and academics) have the power to shape how politics is discussed in terms of both *what* is discussed and *how* these discussions play out – a power that an overwhelming majority of the population do not possess. To suggest that pollsters are simply doing their job by tweeting daily about the latest riders and runners is to miss the point – if starting over from fresh, would we design democratic discourse to be shaped around the desires and interests of opinion pollsters and other individuals with an unusually high level of interest in formal institutional politics or, instead, the experiences of the majority of people in their day-to-day lives?

As was the case in 2017, a subset of British political science played a key role in the unfolding of the above, with particular weight placed on the ability of prominent members of the

[1] MRP stands for multilevel regression and post-stratification, 'a technique for estimating public opinion in small areas using large national samples', Hanretty, C. (2019). An Introduction to Multilevel Regression and Post-Stratification for Estimating Constituency Opinion. *Political Studies Review*. https://doi.org/10.1177/1478929919864773, p.1.

discipline to predict electoral outcomes. Predictions here take on a role akin to prospecting, Twitter the boundless cyber-territory on which this takes place, the hope of the speculator being that they will strike lucky and reap the subsequent reward of having 'called it'. After the election results were public knowledge, many of these individuals took to Twitter to remind other users that they had correctly predicted the eventual outcome. These comments made little or no reference to the *substance* of the election outcome in political terms, particularly for those at the sharp end of policy proposals that are now likely to transpire, and often appeared to take some pleasure in telling those who had campaigned for the losing Labour party that their efforts had failed and that they were, simply, wrong. This seems a hollow way of viewing the political world. While it is, of course, fun to predict what will happen to things – football teams, soap opera characters, and so on - when the object of prediction is the society we live in and the only moral weight placed on each outcome is how close it is to what you guessed, parading in such triumph while mocking those invested in the losing campaign is unedifying at best, outright toxic at worst.

Some have defended the role of psephology – the study and forecasting of elections – in the 2019 campaign on the basis of accuracy, arguing that the sub-discipline performed well in the sense that it broadly 'called' the election outcome. This is worth commenting on; as with the case of pollsters above, 'getting it right' serves to give psephology a pass, the glow of having successfully forecasted the outcome precluding any serious questioning of the purpose and value of such activities. Again, it is important to consider power and influence – if psephologists were making these projections largely for their own entertainment, that would be one thing, but the reality is that their predictions carry weight and enter into a broader discussion around the likely outcome of the election. Aside from possibly offering a small number of voters more information on which to base their tactical vote choice (something most national vote intention polls cannot do at the constituency level), it is hard to see exactly what this plethora of forecasting and polling offers most people and, given the manner in which it dominates discussion of the election, it is conversely relatively easy to make the case that it is a distraction from more substantive policy issues. Rather than defending the status quo that sees polling dominate election coverage during campaigns, a more interesting question to ask is what a democratic case in favour of polling during campaigns would actually consist of? Although we agree that having some impression of the thoughts of fellow citizens on certain issues of the day may aid democratic accountability, it is less clear that this applies in the fast-moving environment of a campaign where the majority of polls focus on vote intention.

As has been noted elsewhere, many political scientists have shown suspicion towards the left-wing politics Corbyn's Labour has represented in recent years. Reacting to this, some Twitter users have developed the meme of the 'Pol Prof', this itself generated from the usernames of prominent professorial colleagues who utilise the platform as well as the popular parody account based on stereotypes of this group, @ProfBritPol_PhD. The case made by many left-

wing users of Twitter against the 'Pol Profs' is that they tend to launder what are broadly centrist or centre-right political views through quantitative data that is subsequently presented as non-ideological. The Pol Profs are typecast as residing in an online universe of 'sensible' political commentary that is supportive of a brand of centrist politics similar to that advocated by Tony Blair in the 1990s, nowadays voiced by political columnists like John Rentoul and Andrew Rawnsley. Along these lines, the Pol Profs regularly produce 'takes' on political events that are broadly favourable to the status quo of political institutions and policies and bemoan the inability of those on the left to accept that their ideas are beyond credibility.

The Pol Prof phenomenon is perhaps an extreme manifestation of a broader tendency shared among the intensely politically involved. This is that in addition to being professionally associated with the formal political world – participating in it, studying it, commenting on it – this same group are likely to also be *fans* of politics in some sense. To put it another way, there is a slippage between this professional involvement and a personal, leisurely involvement. Indeed, this was illustrated particularly clearly when, during the UCU strikes of 2018 and 2019, even striking political scientists continued to post political commentary on Twitter on a daily basis, the line between work and play seemingly blurry for many. Here, we invoke Jonathan Dean's notion of politicised fandom, which he theorises as applying to the relationship between some politicians and their 'fans' (such as Ed Miliband's 'Milifandom').[xiii] We would argue that a version of this fan relationship exists at something like the level of the system for members of the intensely involved: it is almost the case that they are fans of *themselves* inasmuch as they are fans of the political universe that they not only continually reproduce but also inhabit – a Westminster-focused 24-hour merry-go-round of news and comment populated by a series of familiar faces, including their own.

This tendency crystallises in certain forms of media (notably Twitter, but also broadcast magazine-style shows, radio content, or podcasts) where politics is discussed in the same style and format as professional sport – surface light-heartedness underpinned by deep reverence. For example, former Labour special adviser and now-comedian Matt Forde hosts a podcast ('The Political Party') that sits at this intersection of banter and seriousness. Members of the intensely politically involved are invited to share anecdotes from their political or journalistic careers, often tales about power and the powerful that are told in a jovial manner. These discussions are characterised by an easy bipartisanship, with the idea that politics is actually about conflict replaced by a warm and fuzzy notion that the *real* kinship in the political world comes from the fraternity of those so intensely involved in it, this opposed to partisan or other forms of kinship rooted in opposition to another on the basis of ideology.

For this group, politics is akin to a television show that they enjoy consuming – they have favourite characters, plot arcs, catchphrases – but also have a significant hand in writing each day through their commentary and output on all forms of media. They are both consumer

and creator. The Corbyn problem can be viewed through this prism as the intensely involved losing control of the plot and thus no longer being able to enjoy the show as the story went in a direction they didn't care for. This attitude is clear in comments made by John Rentoul who, after the election, wrote: 'It is back to boring normal politics now. Tedious things such as a government with a standard majority in the House of Commons trying to do difficult things like get better results out of the NHS, schools and police'.[xiv] Their favoured writers are back; normal service can resume.

Returning to the role of political science in the above developments, what is the diagnosis? There is the potential for a long answer in the disciplinary history tradition, but we will resist that for now. Instead, there are a small number of contemporary currents in both academia and the society in which it sits that offer some purchase on the question of how we, as a discipline, got here. Broadly, academic research as a whole has been forced by necessity into an institutional turn towards ever-increasing 'relevance', with significant onus placed by successive governments on what academia can offer both them, in policy development and implementation terms, but more often what it can offer businesses and industry. The political science variant of this is most prominently the way that the discipline is increasingly used by politicians, policymakers, and journalists as justification for the choices they make in terms of policy, electoral approach, or broadcast direction. Becoming a justifier, in this regard, is a clear 'pathway to impact', potentially allowing the political scientist in question to claim on behalf of their institution that they have had some influence on public or political discourse. Concomitantly, Twitter has seen individual academics enter the business of curating an individual brand on social media, this extending well beyond the dissemination of their published academic works and into the realm of commentary on various ongoing political and cultural events and sometimes even their personal lives. The combination of these currents – the pursuit of 'relevance' and an ability to cultivate a personal brand – sees individuals formulating the latter in such a way as to maximise the likely success of the former. Of course, doing so means ensuring that the 'brand' does not imperil one's relationships with other members of the intensely involved – for example, not challenging the assumptions underlying both the form and content of what powerful people do and withholding public judgement as to the consequences of the actual decisions they make. In this context, it is little wonder that large amounts of political commentary from the political science community has come to focus on the question of 'who will win?' rather than 'what will (or, indeed, should) *X* do if they win?' as answers to the latter hold the potential to stray too close to controversy. A further consequence is that much of the 'public' engagement being undertaken in these instances is rarely directed at the public. If anything, it is public engagement above the public's heads, with the public serving as *witnesses to* the engagement between fellow members of the intensely involved rather than being participants in it.

Corbyn was never the problem

The initial skirmishes of the Labour leadership contest have made it clear that the next leader is likely to receive similarly negative treatment to Corbyn – this will differ depending on who they are (Rebecca Long-Bailey's Irish heritage or Keir Starmer's owning an AGA cooker two possible variations on the theme), but it will persist nonetheless. We would argue that the mainstream political media, and many political scientists, are guilty of possessing a general lack of curiosity about left-wing politics, something that leads to the proliferation of incorrect or vacuous statements regarding the internal politics of the Labour Party and other movements further to the left. As with the mirage of the pool of water appearing to the parched desert traveller, the promise of any actual left-wing politics being seen as credible to many of the intensely politically involved will be forever out of reach, always just beyond the horizon. This, however, is unlikely to stop many (including some of the leadership contenders) from running towards it.

But what of the deeper strains we identified above? One trend that seems to emerge from our account relates to the group of the intensely politically involved. Not necessarily politicians or even working for an explicitly political organisation, this group drive and shape the dominant manner in which politics is discussed in the UK on a daily basis. In this group, we see an interesting variation on Stuart Hall's notion of political commitment: 'a giving of the whole self to politics'.[xv] In one sense, the intensely involved clearly *are* giving their lives to politics, ceaselessly discussing it and, presumably, thinking about it. For many, it will also pay the bills. But on the other hand this giving, this commitment, is apolitical – it is not a commitment to an ideology or some idea of what *could be*, nor even a commitment to a specific set of political institutions. Rather, it is a commitment to politics as a series of events and people associated with what is happening at some site of political power (usually Westminster) on a given day. And because there is no commitment to anything except discussing and witnessing what *is*, this commitment becomes a tacit endorsement of politics as the mere management of the present. The implications of this for UK politics are simultaneously not fully developed and yet obvious all the same – broadly speaking, a favouring of those politicians or movements who appear content to play along with a politics *without* politics at the expense of hostility to those who do not.

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[i] We would like to thank Matthew Barnfield, Dan Evans, and Sophia Hatzisaviddou for comments and discussion on earlier drafts of this paper.

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